Developing Cultural Tourism in Border Province: A Case Study on Bueng Kan Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This articles aims to study tourists' opinions and tourists' demands for cultural tourism and guidelines to developing cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand. This is a new Thai – Lao border province with the Mekong River as a natural boundary. The researchers applied Mix method. The results show that most tourists appreciate memories from the cultural tourism trip in Bueng Kan province and would like to learn more about the way of life of the local community. Regarding the demand for cultural tourism, overall, tourists' demands for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province is at the high level. The guidelines to develop cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand that were proposed included 1) improvement of the infrastructure 2) creating routes and activities based on local culture 3) establishing a tourists center of information 4) supporting homestay at the Cultural tourism destination.

Keywords: Border province, Cultural tourism, tourists' opinions, tourists' demands

1. Introduction

Culture is an important part of the tourism product, considered to include family patterns, folklore, social customs, monuments, historical structures and landmarks (Weiler & Hall, 1992). Cultural tourism bring tourists chance to experience the unique of culture, heritage and to contact with host population in destination (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). It is the reason for experiencing and learning about different culture has grown and become prevalent among tourists nowadays (Boyd, 2002).

Bueng Kan province in northeastern Thailand is the newest border between Thai and Laos provinces with the Mekong River forming a natural border (Bueng Kan provincial office, 2012). In terms of a border area, Bueng Kan province has a unique culture to attract tourists as Moufakkir & Kelly (2010) stated; tourism potential can be realized in border areas. Factors such as history, heritage values, natural and environmental resources shared by neighboring states join together with great symbolism to bring opportunities to feel new experiences for tourists. That is why cultural tourism has been emerging and plays an important role in the tourism development strategy in Bueng Kan province.

In term of tourism development, Hennessey et al. (2008) states that culture is one of the factors that can improve the competitiveness of a tourism destination. Cultural assets are crucial in attracting tourists to a specific destination, while tourism brings new and fresh resources to the cultural sector, spotting new entrepreneurial opportunities (Alberti & Giusti, 2012). Furthermore, cultural tourism exists because tourists want either to experience living places and cultures other than their own, or to gain access to foreign cultures, different in time and space, through artifacts housed away from their original locations, often in museums (Prentice, 2001). In cultural tourism management, the issues concern what specific travel behaviors make cultural tourists distinct from other travelers or how large the demand for cultural tourism is, and what elements of culture attract tourists to approach an answer in which the planner or organization can create a different image of the cultural tourism destination (Hennessey et al., 2008).

Therefore, with regards to Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, these research questions were raised 1) What are the tourists' opinions and tourists' demand on Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand and What guidelines

should be implemented to develop Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural tourism

Culture is an important part of the tourism product and is one of the factors that can improve the competitiveness of a tourism destination (Hennessey et al., 2008). Cultural tourism is the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs (Richard, 1996). Ivanovic (2008) states that cultural tourism can be identified in two main cultural motivations included education (element of formal and informal learning) and novelty (authenticity and uniqueness). During a cultural tourism trip, tourists travel and experience folklore, customs, natural landscapes, and historical landmarks as well as being involved in other activities such as nature, adventure, sports, festivals, crafts and sightseeing (MacDonald and Jolliffe 2002).

In destination, local culture provides and contributes to building a sense of local identity and solidarity. It seems to be a basis for tourism development. Cultural tourism effort to promote the local identity, regional languages, and minority cultures and focuses on preservation or promotion local culture, as well (Brennan et al., 2009). Cultural tourism also provides opportunities for visitors to learn about another area's history and way of life (Hennessey et al., 2008). Moreover, Hughes & Allen (2005) regarded cultural tourism as a subset of eco-tourism which concerns small groups of tourists seeking to know about and sustain the natural environment, wishing to learn about the culture and the need to sustain local communities (Ceballos – Lascurain, 1987).

2.2 Background of Cultural Tourism in Bueng Kan Province

Bueng Kan province located in northeastern Thailand, is the newest province in Thailand. It was separated from Nong Khai province and established officially in 2011. This is also a border province between Thailand and Laos with the Mekong River forming the natural boundary. Nowadays, tourism is an important issue in the strategic development of provinces. Especially is cultural tourism considered as a prominent type of tourism in Bueng Kan province (Bueng Kan provincial office, 2012).

Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province has rich and diversified cultural resources. In terms of border provinces, Bueng Kan province has both Thai culture (Bueng Kan provincial office, 2012) and Isan culture which is named for Laos people living in Thailand and recognizes the uniqueness in each culture (Noseworthy, 2012). As a province on the Mekong River, the culture and legends of the people in Bueng Kan province are mostly related to the great Naga, a Mythical animal in Thai Buddhist culture (Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.). Prominently, Naga Fireballs, allegedly shot from the Mekong River, recently became the focus of a major festival that attracts many (mainly domestic) tourist pilgrims (Cohen, 2007). Apart from that, the Luangpisaijatiyaram temple and Ahhongsilawat temple are well-known temples in this area as sacred sites dealing with the great Naga. Besides that, the living culture of a Thai – Lao border province also brings tourists new experiences by strolling and shopping for local goods and enjoying local foods at the Thai-Lao Market (BangKok Post, 2012).

As Gelbman (2011) state a complex reality of living between two societies and cultures makes border areas become important attractions for tourists. Bueng Kan province is becoming an emerging cultural tourism destination in Thailand.

2.3 The Components of Tourism Destination

In any industry, a product is developed to meet the needs of potential customers. The development of the tourism industry has triggered the development of tourism products in which, the key questions raised are 'What makes a memorable and successful experience for tourism or what about general expectations versus niche tourism? (Xu, 2010).

In regards to tourism management, destination is not a single product. As the World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2007) states a local tourism destination is a physical space in which a tourist spends at least one overnight. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions and tourist resources. It is consistent with what Buhalis (2000) states that destination is amalgam of tourism products and services, which facilities and services are designed to meet the needs of the tourists (Cooper et al., 1998). Buhalis (2000) suggested that the core of destinations is comprised of the six As framework includes: attractions, amenities, available packages, accessibility, activities and

ancillary services. In terms of tourism management, accommodation management should be considered to attract tourists' to stay longer at destinations. Middleton (1994) states that accommodations are integrally related to the attractions of a destination and could enhance its appeal. Apart from that, local communities are the main stakeholders of tourism development, thus, attitudes of the local community should also be considered in tourism management. Lastly, to communicate destination information to a wider range of tourists, advertising seems to be a useful mechanic to inform, pursue and remind tourism products of the destination (Morrison, 2013).

3. Research Objectives

For this research, the following issues of study were specified

- To study tourists' opinions and tourists' demands for Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.
- To study guidelines to improve Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

4. Research Methodology

To ensure the study was objective, the researchers employed quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods or a mixed method approach as shown below:

4.1 To study tourists' opinions and tourists' demands on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

For the quantitative data, the participants were tourists who travel to Bueng Kan province, Thailand. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: 1) demographic information including sex, age, educational level, marital status and income; 2) tourists' opinions on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province; 3) tourists' demand for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province which was considered in seven aspects that included: attitudes, attractions, accessibility, accommodations, amenities, activities and advertising. The questionnaire used multiple choice questions in which respondents select one of the alternative possible answers and Likert scales with five options: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree. The researchers interpreted the completed questionnaires by dividing the question scale into a 5 point scale, as shown in table 1:

Table 1. Significance of points

Average Scores	Levels of Significant
1.00-1.80	Lowest
1.81-2.60	Low
2.61-3.41	Moderate
3.42-4.20	High
4.21-5.00	Highest

According to data from the Department of Tourism (2011) there were 137,455 tourists who traveled to Bueng Kan province in 2011. Using Yamane's formula (1973), the researcher calculated the sampling size as 400. The statistical analysis of the data used the mean, standard deviation and Chi-square tests.

4.2 To study the guideline to improve cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

For the qualitative data collection, a focus group discussion was organized. There were eight experts including academics, planners, tourism entrepreneurs and representatives of involved public organizations and local philosophers. The group discussed the appropriate guidelines for developing cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province. Data analysis was performed using descriptive analysis.

5. Research Area

Bueng Kan province became a new province, the 77th in Thailand (shown in figure 1), officially in 2011. It is located on the Thai – Lao border, 751 kilometers from Bangkok. Bueng Kan province has an area of 4 305.746 square kilometer and a population of about 411 789 people. In here, most of population is Buddhist. Nowadays, this province is an emerging

cultural destination with diversity of tourism resources such as Buddhism religious temples, local life living along the Mekong River, local foods and the belief on the Serpent – Naga.

Figure 1. Research area

6. Research Result

6.1 Tourists' opinions and tourists' demands for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand

6.2 Tourists' opinions on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

With regards to cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, 41.00 % of tourists find out tourism information on Bueng Kan province via tourist websites. An average of 41.8% of tourists believe that prominence of cultural tourism is cross-cultural between Thai – Lao. 41.00% of tourists are interested in cultural destinations dealing with faith and beliefs of the local community and 28.00% of tourists had an impression in the cultural significance of the tourist destination in Bueng Kan province. On identity of cultural destinations, 46.20% of tourists refer to cultural destinations dealing with faith and beliefs of the local community and 37.00% of tourists would like to experience the traditional culture and authenticity of a destination. An average of 42.20 % of tourists would like to enjoy traditional cultural activities with local people and those that believe that these activities will lend support to the identity of cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province are 44.80%. 100% of the tourists have appreciative memories on their cultural tourism trip in Bueng Kan province. Finally, on improving cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, 38.00% of the tourists mention learning activities to enhance knowledge on the way of life of the local community.

6.3 Tourists' demands on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

Table 2. The results of tourists' demands for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand.

Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Attitudes			
Local communities have positive thinking about tourists	4.21	.57	highest
Warm welcome from local community	4.32	.64	highest
Establish a connection between local community and tourists	4.09	.65	high
Communities retain local traditional living culture	4.20	.72	high
Attractions			
Expectations of experience from cultural destination	4.48	.60	highest
Integrity and authenticity of cultural destination	4.54	.74	highest
Interpret living culture in Bueng Kan province	4.02	.75	high
Create memories of destination images	4.07	.65	high
Accessibility			
Access tourism destination conveniently and easily	4.48	.61	highest
Improving road conditions	4.39	.68	highest
Parking zones	4.31	.67	highest
Clearly labeled sign posts of cultural destination	4.22	.58	highest
Safe paths to the destination in Bueng Kan province	4.45	.52	highest

Accommodations			
Diversity in accommodations such as tents/ homestay	3.82	.64	high
Decorate accommodations to interpret local cultures at destination	3.61	.70	high
Facilities in accommodation	3.85	.65	high
Consider quantity of accommodations and quantity of tourists	4.05	.70	high
Fair and suitable pricing	4.09	.65	high
Activities			
Enhanced learning of local traditional culture	3.84	.67	high
Training in preparing local traditional foods	3.79	.56	high
Sightseeing at cultural destinations with interesting landscapes	3.86	.79	high
Experiences with storytelling and beliefs in the local living culture of local community	4.14	.76	high
Amenities			
Public utilities (electricity / water / telephone / internet)	4.22	.69	highest
Ability of local guides	3.97	.65	high
Vehicles for sightseeing at tourism destination	4.16	.64	high
Restroom Management System	4.32	.61	highest
Advertising			
Center of tourism information	3.89	.70	high
Reliability and updating of tourist information	4.28	.65	highest
Convenient and easy access to tourism information	3.81	.70	high
Official website on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province	3.78	.87	high
Total	4.11	.13	high

Table 2 shows the tourists' demands for cultural tourism in Bung Kan province, Thailand. Each aspect of these finding is interpreted below:

For attitudes, local communities have positive thinking about tourists is at the highest level (average = 4.21, S.D. = .57). Warm welcome from local community is at the highest level (average = 4.32, S.D. = .64). Establish a connection between local community and tourists is at the high level (average = 4.09, S.D. = .65). Communities retain local traditional living culture is at the high level (average = 4.20, S.D. = .72).

For attractions, expectations of experience from cultural destination is at the highest level (average = 4.48, S.D. = .60). Integrity and authenticity of cultural destination is at the highest level (average = 4.54, S.D. = .74). Interpret living culture in Bueng Kan province is at the high level (average = 4.02, S.D. = .75). Create memories of destination images is at the high level (average = 4.07, S.D. = .65).

For accessibility, access tourism destination conveniently and easily is at the highest level (average = 4.48, S.D. = .61). Improving road condition is at the highest level (average = 4.39, S.D. = .68). Parking zones is at the highest level (average = 4.31, S.D. = .67). Clearly labeled sign posts of cultural destination is at the highest level (average = 4.22, S.D. = .58). Safe paths to the destination in Bueng Kan province is at the highest level (average = 4.45, S.D. = .52).

For accommodations, diversity in accommodations such as tents/ homestay is at the high level (average = 3.81, S.D. = .64). Decorate accommodations to interpret local cultures at destination is at the high level (average = 3.61, S.D. = .70). Facilities in accommodation is at the high level (average = 3.85, S.D. = .65). Consider quantity of accommodations and quantity of tourists is at the high level (average = 4.05, S.D. = .70). Fair and suitable pricing is at the high level (average = 4.09, S.D. = .65).

For activities, enhanced learning of local traditional culture is at the high level (average = 3.84, S.D. = .67). Training in preparing local traditional foods is at the high level (average = 3.97, S.D. = .56). Sightseeing at cultural destination with interesting landscapes is at the high level (average = 3.86, S.D. = .79). Experiences with storytelling and beliefs in the local living culture of the local community is at the high level (average = 4.11, S.D. = .76).

For amenities, public utilities (electricity / water / telephone / internet) is at the highest level (average = 4.22, S.D. = .69). Restroom management system is at the highest level (average = 4.32, S.D. = .61). Ability of local guides is at the high level (average = 3.97, S.D. = .65). Vehicles for sightseeing at tourism destination is at the high level (average = 4.16, S.D. = .64).

On advertising, reliability and updating of tourist information is at the highest level (average = 4.28, S.D. = .65). Center of tourism information is at the high level (average = 3.89, S.D. = .70). Convenient and easy access to tourism information is at the high level (average = 3.81, S.D. = .70). Official website on cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province is at the high level (average = 3.78, S.D. = .87).

Overall, tourists' demands for Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province is at the high level (average = 4.11, S.D. = .13), with each aspect from the highest level to the lowest level shown in table 3.

Table 3. Summary of tourists' demands on seven aspects of Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province

Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Attractions	4.28	0.34	highest
Accessibility	4.37	0.30	highest
Attitudes	4.20	0.33	high
Accommodations	3.88	0.35	high
Activities	3.91	0.37	high
Amenities	4.17	0.34	high
Advertising	3.94	0.37	high
Total	4.11	0.13	high

Table 3 shows that tourists' demands for Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province in terms of attractions is at the highest level (average = 4.28, S.D. = .34) and accessibility is at the highest level (average = 4.37, S.D. = .30), while attitudes (average = 4.20, S.D. = .33), accommodations (average = 4.88, S.D. = .35), activities (average = 3.91, S.D. = .37), amenities (average = 4.17, S.D. = .34), and advertising (average = 3.94, S.D. = .37) are all at the high level.

6.4 Guidelines to develop cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand

Focus group discussion was organized. Based on the results of tourists' opinions and tourists' demand for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, eight experts who included academics, tourism entrepreneurs, and representatives of involved public organizations and local philosophers proposed guidelines to improve the potential of cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, as detailed below:

6.4.1 Improvement of the infrastructure

Infrastructure base of a country is a determinant of the attractiveness of a tourism destination. Firstly, the transport infrastructure is a significant factor in the destination's development. Conditional roads, clear signposts and public vehicles will support the increasing tourists' flow. These are the first steps in Cultural tourism management in Bueng Kan province. Secondly, public utilities (water, electricity, internet, telephone) are issues in tourism management. Involved public organizations should provide budgetary support to improve basis infrastructures on roads and public utilities. It not only adds potential to the Cultural tourism destination but also improves the quality of the host community's living standard.

6.4.2 Creating routes and activities based on local culture

Bueng Kan province has diverse of cultural resource. These are Buddhism temples, local traditional festival, local life living and the belief of local residents. There are main attribute to attract tourists arrive in here. Department of Tourism and Sports and tourism entrepreneurs should have collaboration to create cultural routes and tourists' activities based on local culture. On cultural tourism related to local food, tourists can receive training in preparing local foods such as papaya salad, Isan chili paste, or sightseeing at border markets along the Mekong River where they can understand daily living of the host communities in the border province. For Cultural tourism dealing with faith and beliefs, tourists can pay homage to sacred sites or Buddha statues and join in local festivals i.e. the Fireball Rocket Festival and enjoy storytelling in the local community.

6.4.3 Establishing a tourists center of information

For convenient and easy access to cultural tourism information, provincial government and Department of Tourism and Sports in Bueng Kan province should consider to establish a tourist information center. This center would provide information about the cultural destination, cultural activities, accommodations and other related services. This will be helpful to tourists in saving costs and in getting credible information. An official Cultural tourism website should be

created. Nowadays, the Internet is a convenient way to reach a wider range of tourists, especially international tourists. This website would be managed by the tourist center of information and would continuously have up-to-date information.

Apart from that, forms of information play a role in determining destination image. Thus, brochures or cultural tourism guidebooks should be published by additional channels to reach tourists. Besides the tourist center of information, the published materials should be placed in travel agencies, hotels and bus stations to facilitate tourists during travelling.

6.4.4 Supporting homestay at the cultural tourism destination

Cultural tourism brings tourists opportunities to experience the host community's lifestyle and enhances the awareness of the difference in culture at each destination. With the Mekong River as a natural boundary between Thailand and Laos, Bueng Kan province has an advantage location to establish homestay along the Mekong River.

The tourism activities were organized in community sites to study lifestyle, culture and manufacture of locality with Home Stay is an interesting activity in cultural tourism. Establishing and management by local community, homestay is an alternative way to support relationships and increase positive thinking between tourists and the host community. During staying in Homestay, tourists will have firsthand experience with local daily activities such as boat and fishing along the Mekong River, cross to Laos market and making food from local ingredients.

Moreover, in terms of the newest province in Thailand, provincial government should promote and improve homestay to incorporate the Homestay Standard in Thailand. It would create a reliable image for Cultural tourism development in this province.

7. Conclusion

This research aims to study tourists' opinions and tourists' demands for Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand to develop guidelines to improve Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand. The mix method research was applied. The results show that tourists are interested in Cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, especially Cultural tourism destinations dealing with the faith and beliefs of the local community. They also appreciated memories of their Cultural tourism trip in Bueng Kan province and would like to learn more about the way of life of the local community.

Regarding the demand for Cultural tourism, tourists' demands for cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province is at the high level (average = 4.11, S.D. = .13), attractions is at the highest level (average = 4.28, S.D. = .34) and accessibility is at the highest level (average = 4.37, S.D. = .30), while attitudes (average = 4.20, S.D. = .33), accommodations (average = 4.88, S.D. = .35), activities (average = 3.91, S.D. = .37), amenities (average = 4.17, S.D. = .34) and advertising (average = 3.94, S.D. = .37) are all at the high level.

Finally, the guidelines to improve cultural tourism in Bueng Kan province, Thailand that were proposed included 1) improvement of the infrastructure 2) creating routes and activities based on local culture 3) establishing a tourists center of information 4) supporting homestay at the cultural tourism destination.

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